

## THE ASYMMETRIC WARFARE AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

### Abstract

*The authors sum up the more capital questions of the asymmetric warfare and its psychological factors. They give overview about the military-scientific basis of the asymmetric warfare and its threats; interpretation of asymmetry in the activities of national security; Systematic elements of strategic asymmetry; coherence of strategy reacting to asymmetric threats with other strategies and finally psychological aspects of asymmetric warfare.*

### INTRODUCTION

In our article we want to discuss one of the most frequently mentioned topics of today's military science and national security, the so-called "*asymmetric warfare and intimidation*" and its psychological aspects. Our aim is not the explanation of the military scientific aspect of the term, but the sociological and psychological aspect of this phenomenon. But to do this, it is essential to analyse the essence of warfare in a couple of words.

The second part of the research deals with the socio-psychological mass aspect of this term, its influence on today's national security

### 1. THE MILITARY- SCIENTIFIC BASIS OF THE ASYMMETRIC WARFARE AND ITS THREATS

National security (military) specialists have been using this term as some kind of a paradigm, however, in our domestic literature, it is not possible to find any basic analysis of the main questions of the asymmetric warfare, that would give its main definition, and based on that would give the answers within the area of national security. If we analyse these scientific papers, we can see that this warfare strategy is considered an axiom, and quite often terrorism and asymmetric warfare are looked upon as one and the same.

We base our findings on relevant research in the USA, on results of operational experience, on the information from our domestic literature, as well as on our analysis of this topic.

As a starting point we can consider a simple fact that in wars, in conflicts when weapons are used there are always present differences (asymmetries) between the participants, in the terms of quality, quantity and morale. It is a historical fact that in certain times, from the point of view of the final result in wars, these differences, called asymmetries, did not play a significant role, though it was different in other conflicts. This simplifying viewpoint does not take into consideration or shadows the fact that certain warring parties build their strategy on these very asymmetries.

According to the Chinese Sun Tzu, every warfare is based on deception and he suggests to avoid the enemy which bears concentrated force, and to attack the enemy only by means of military deception. As a matter of fact, Sun Tzu built an existing strategy on

asymmetry, which is eerily similar to the situation that the USA and its allies have to face today.

The common interpretation of the term requires a complex definition, since only this common platform can provide for future discussion. Almost all relevant experts establish that asymmetric warfare is not a new category, since even in the bible David and Goliath exemplify the difference in the strategy of warriors who possess asymmetric capabilities. However, a common definition and the answers to asymmetric threats have appeared only recently, the reason is that the actual military scientific and national security research started after 9/11 2001 when the fight against terrorism in the USA and its European allies became the central point of the national security.

## 2. INTERPRETATION OF ASSYMETRY IN THE ACTIVITIES OF NATIONAL SECURITY

In 1998 the National defence University of Washington defined asymmetric warfare as an „*unfair*” form of warfare.<sup>1</sup> This definition was based on highly subjective evaluation and quite often it did not represent an easily managed category.

In 1999 the definition presented in the Joint Strategy Review tried to establish a wider definition which would be more acceptable for the military, as well as for the „*decision-makers*”, the introduction of the so- called asymmetric approach (viewpoint). According to this term, „*the strategy of the enemy is aimed at eluding, deceiving or undermining the weaknesses of the USA with methods that significantly differ from the operational ones expected by the USA... usually they focus on psychological elements, like shock effect or disturbance, which influence the American ability to initiate, morale, as well as freedom of action. The asymmetric approach is based on thorough evaluation of the vulnerability of the enemy. It often applies innovative, not traditional procedures, weapons or technologies. Asymmetric warfare can appear in the entire spectrum of military activities, it can be operational, tactical, and strategic.*”<sup>2</sup>

This definition has tight strings with national security in America, with the challenges and strategic environment, in other words, it is not general or common enough in its character. Moreover, it contains only the „*negative asymmetry*”, which is based on the opinion that the USA is already in great advantage in its technological, military, economic capabilities compared to anybody else, so it does not deal with situations where equal or almost equal partners apply asymmetric procedures against each other, in other words, they base their entire strategy on asymmetry.

Steven Metz and Douglas V Johnson II tried to establish a more general, more complex definition, which can improve the above- mentioned insufficiencies.<sup>3</sup>

“*Asymmetry when applied to national security and the military, practically represents different varieties of action, organisations, way of thinking from those of the opponent,*

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Assessment 1998: Engaging Power for Peace (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> Joint Strategy Review 1999, Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 1999, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Metz és Douglas V. Johnson II. Asymmetry and U.S. military strategy: definition, background, and strategic concepts; (5., 6. oldal),

<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=223>, (2008. 04. 06.)

*which is aimed at maximising their own strength and to use the weaknesses of the enemy, as well as to be able to initiate or to gain more significant freedom of action. So, asymmetry can be politically-strategic or military- strategic or the combination of both."*

According to the above-mentioned authors, in practice it means different methods, technologies, organisational framework, it can also be described by several other characteristics, such as the dimensions, levels and forms of asymmetry.

### **3. SYSTEMATIC ELEMENTS OF STRATEGIC ASSYMMETRY**

#### **3.1. DIMENSIONS OF ASSYMMETRY**

Strategic asymmetry may be positive or negative in its character. It is usually determined by the opinions or the relative positions of the opposing parties. When speaking about positive asymmetry, the United States, for example, emphasises the importance of high level of training, efficient leadership, and the top technology of the leadership infrastructure, as well as the military arsenal which supports them. This strategy is built on the exploitation of this relevant superiority; on the other hand, negative asymmetry is based not on its own strength, but on the desire to use the weaknesses of the enemy. Consequently, based on these terms, the coalitions led by the USA have to prepare for combat against threats represented by negative asymmetry.

Asymmetry possesses some kind of time aspect; it can have a short- time aspect, as well as a long-time one. There are several examples for both in military science. There are fewer examples for long-term asymmetry in our days, though certain superpowers, in certain periods of time, held onto their success based on positive asymmetry, but in long term, the balance moved towards equality.

Strategic asymmetry can be brought about intentionally, or there can be asymmetry that appears because of the relative position of the opposing parties. Success is not always guaranteed by the superiority in the basic situation, because the analysis of situations shows that the reacting strategies must be flexible and adaptable if a warring opponent whose strategy is based on negative asymmetry needs to be defeated.

The factor of the risk level of asymmetric threat can be low or very high. Forces of excellent training who are operationally well-prepared, the possibility of success or failure represent the high risk category of asymmetry. Having forces that require serious material investment, not to mention their deployment against asymmetric threats is of high risk, to mention, for example, the terrorist attack in Aden of the USS COLE, where terrorists achieved great success without much expenditure. On the other hand, terrorism is characterised by small expenditure, expected success and low risk factors.

#### **3.2. COHERENCE OF STRATEGY REACTING TO ASYMMETRIC THREATS WITH OTHER STRATEGIES**

Threats are very complex, consequently, reacting to those needs complex, coordinated and harmonised strategy. Diplomatic, economic, military and other actions need to be coordinated, so that their interference would target strengthening.

Asymmetry can be of cost-effective or psychological nature, although they are interconnected. Materialistic asymmetry can quite often produce a psychological one. Sides who used manipulative techniques, who built their actions on psychological asymmetry, were successful. The most effective is the combination of the two, although psychological advantages need more of intellectual and less of financial investment.

In history there are several examples of asymmetry of operational level. During WW2, for example, the submarine warfare of Germans was aimed at countering the superiority of the traditional colonial one of the British.

In the case of political-strategically asymmetry, military advantages are reached not by military means. This strategy was successful in North Vietnam, where it was possible to portray their moral superiority against the aggressor, the USA, while neither Milosevic, nor Saddam Hussein succeeded in doing so.

### **3.3. FORMS OF ASYMMETRY**

Asymmetry can be recognised both in methods and procedures, which means different operational and strategic concept (guerrilla warfare vs. traditional operational concept, airborne, airborne mobile operations vs. traditional infantry warfare, etc.)

Technological asymmetry was a regular phenomenon in the past (eg. The Vietnam War, the Afghan talibs vs. The USA, etc.)

Asymmetry is represented in the „*willingness*“, in the moral part of the warfare, as long as a state fights for its existence and its basic interests. In this case this aim can multiply military forces; on the other hand, the combat willingness of an occupying party, whose aims are not of vital importance, can be weaker, due to its moral deficiency.

Organisational asymmetry can also be of great importance in the final result of combat, since the organisational frames, warfare based on teamwork, preparation for decision-making significantly determines the best operational concept and success.

## **4. PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ASYMMETRIC WARFARE**

As we have shown in our short summary above, there is a well-defined system of the notion of asymmetric warfare in special literature, which also deals with the analysis of the psychological aspects of past warfare.

If we want to analyse the topic, not to base it only on history, but also in the present and the possible future scenarios of security risk factors, it cannot be avoided to analyse the psychological aspects that are not of local character, which, in our case, describe those psychological aspects that are more serious than local problems and they can be of interest for the analysis of the phenomenon.

### **4.1. FRAGMENTS OF THE MASS PSYCHOLOGY OF THE ASYMMETRIC WARFARE**

In case of the notion of asymmetric warfare when it represents the actions of opposing forces that are in confrontation, when the sphere of operation, their targets, arsenals used by one of the sides can significantly differ from those of the opponent – first of all, we need to emphasize that it is not a new phenomenon.

We have already pointed out, asymmetric warfare could have been recognised starting from the ancient times up to modern times, and the fact that it plays such a significant role either in military doctrine research or in publications in the press, has two basic reasons.

As we see, one of the reasons is that something has ended, something that, relatively for a long time, even if not easily but still could handle certain basic security criteria. As a matter of fact, within the historic validity of the Yalta and Potsdam agreements – even though in the meanwhile several military conflicts were marked by the signs of asymmetric warfare- the existence of the bipolar world, the desire to establish balance in the world caused people to think that symmetric arms race is bad but there is nothing it can be substituted by in the upholding of the balance between the two world systems. This system ceased to exist and together with it the unspoken mutual agreement that both poles get a free hand to keep order in their spheres of interest, respectively. There was no fear of the gigantic opposition for the world any more, fears of the past disappeared.

From the point of mass psychology, it could have been the time to feel relieved, but the past fears were immediately substitutes by new ones. It turned out that those prepared for symmetric warfare had no idea whatsoever how to handle asymmetric threats that rapidly became a world problem. Their system of institutions ( including military defence structures ), proved to be as useless in the fight against terrorism as well as in the fight against other, global kinds of crime, for example, financial, IT, technological, biological, cultural, etc. Those brought up in the symmetric system, soon realised that their sense of defencelessness became acute, nobody and nothing can protect them anymore, that each bite of food, each drop of water, each flight, seaside resort or underground station can be dangerous, and these fears are absolutely irrational, since they are threatened regardless of their behaviour or nationality.

The other reason for the seriousness of the mass psychological effects of the asymmetric warfare can be traced back to the so- called globality, which appeared as a result of a non- organic development. It means that the structure of globality in many regions is not the result of its own organic development, but often imports from developed regions built into given cultures non- organically. Even with only one look into the problem, it brings up a number of questions like the influence of films from Western countries or advertisements, in such remote regions that are far away from the possibilities of this kind of lifestyle. How can people who are destitute use these possibilities, those who never used a telephone, who had never been seen by a doctor, and they are as distant from the lifestyle of a Western billionaire as of that of a simple shop assistant? Or what about state or religion leaders who fight for peace, who are not able to accept social differences of this magnitude, not to mention those who base their carriers on demagogue anger raising and call for “*sacred wars*”?

Globality can not only diminish, but can also strengthen prejudice, everyday racism, intentional provocation, aggression. Moreover, those used to symmetric behaviour; do not consider the fact that the developed civilisations are much more vulnerable than the less developed ones. With proper military superiority it is easy to paralyse several road junctions, central energy supply points or satellites. But what is the value of the military superiority when there is no electricity and the main means of transport are donkeys? With this example we simply want to emphasize that in case of asymmetric warfare a certain degree of under development can be an advantage and

this advantage can be diminished not by applying the most modern means, but by new arms doctrines, moreover, by the establishment of new mass psychology behavioural culture.

*„All significant American military failures since 1945 – Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia – were in the fight against a weaker opponent. Either in the so-called hot or cold wars the USA was successful, let the enemy be the Nazi Germany, the empire of Japan or the Soviet Union, however, the Americans did not always win against weaker opponents... In all cases an American Goliath got into stalemate situation and suffered political defeat from the local Davids. The fact that the weaker defeats the stronger, although it is exceptional happens again and again. Sparta eventually won against Athens. Frederick the Great always punched well above his waist. American rebels stopped the British domination in 13 colonies, Jewish terrorists ruled out the Brits from Palestine, the Vietnamese communists got rid of the French, then the Americans from Indochina and the mujaheddins presented a „Vietnam,, to the Soviets in Afghanistan. The relative size of the military forces cannot predict effectively the outcome of the war.”<sup>4</sup>*

It is quite obvious that in an attack against antagonists it is not the most effective if army of massive strength, UAVs or heavy artillery is implied, but rather actions similar to those based on military and police structures, with their help it is possible to diminish the asymmetry of the opposing sides. For the axiomatic practice of such doctrines it is necessary to change old patterns, complicated interest as well as to change the old ways of fighting against global crime.

It is also necessary that those professional – political organisations responsible for the well-being of the mankind would consider their main aim as of the establishment of global security instead of dealing with their local interests. Consequently, asymmetry as an existing reality should not be the tool aimed at the destruction of the „different” or „difference” but it should be a relative basis that could provide the condition of balance to enhance better global cooperation.

## CONCLUSION

In our paper we briefly summarised some correlations between the psychological aspects of asymmetric warfare and its threats. Asymmetric warfare, as it is demonstrated in this article, is a complex sociological problem, which, opposed too many simplifying opinions, is not equal with the terrorism.

If we want to understand the important questions about asymmetric warfare and the consequent threats, it is essential to understand the question of the so-called „choice of target” method of the antagonist who bases its strategy on asymmetry.

To simplify this: how, according to what principles, what are the expected effects when targets are chosen? From the point of view of symmetry, as a potential opponent of asymmetric antagonist, we should be able to define, for the benefit of defence, to define the list of objects and the possible forms of the attack. This task is of priority

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Record : Why the Strong Lose, Parameters, Winter, 2005-06, pp. 16-31., (<http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/05winter/record.htm>)

mainly for operational experts (reconnaissance staff) and they can perform this task successfully only in case if they are familiar with the psychological background of the asymmetric warfare.

However, problems described by us point beyond their military aspects: the concepts of mass psychology are in tight correlation with the fact that the process of globalisation has only partially finished and simply from the nature of this process of development comes the proliferation of asymmetries that hinder normal functions. The first task in connection with this – understanding the reasons of their appearance – to accept their existence. The second task, although we are able to explain the proliferation of this phenomenon, is to urge for a global and worldwide action for the establishment of a possible symmetry. The third task is to clarify the fact that this work cannot be considered simply as a military one, but we need to aim to establish an opportunity for a more thorough globalisation than the existing one.

With our article we want to get connected to the process of learning without hiding our aim to help our Hungarian soldiers who work in the operational field, as well as those civilians who participate in research to understand this undoubtedly significant phenomenon.

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